

Sermon 10-4-09¹

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Hebrews 3:1-6

The Apostle and High Priest of our Confession

Last Sunday's Steelers game against the Cincinnati Bengals was one of the most frustrating games I've watched in awhile – even more frustrating than the loss to the Bears. For starters, it's the Bungles, I mean, come on, that should be a guaranteed win for sure. Secondly, we were up 20 – 9 in the second half which is more than enough to secure a win. Then the fourth quarter came around, the Bengals scored, Sweed dropped the ball in the endzone for an easy catch, and then the Bengals scored again with less than a minute to play. All the while, like many Pittsburgher's, I sat on the couch with my teeth clenched, frustrated that the defense couldn't see all the openings they left in the field because they went with that typical prevent-defense they always resort to when they have a lead. Like most Pittsburghers, I was completely deflated when the team lost the game. "We haven't lost to the Bengals at their home in something like 8 years," I thought to myself. And then I went into Monday, cranky, deflated, and just plain feeling down all because of a silly football game.

Except, at least living in Pittsburgh, it's not a silly game. Emotions always rise and fall depending upon the outcome of the game. It's the gumball machine vision of being a spectator of sports, the energy you put in leads to the feelings following a game. When the team loses, no fan ever says the Steelers lost, we say, "We lost." We identify ourselves with our sports teams; we take their wins and losses seriously, and we attempt to live vicariously through the players who are responsible for our ever-shifting emotions. We

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take the wins or the losses of the Steelers so seriously, riding an emotional rollercoaster from joy to guilt that isn't all that different from the emotions we experience in our spiritual pilgrimage with God.

We walk around with a gumball machine vision of the Christian life; putting a quarter in to get something out of it. When things in our lives are on an upswing, we often feel high as a kite. We are prone to feel "tight" with God, as if what we are experiencing emotionally is somehow tied up in how good we're doing as disciples. But I have a sense that this is far from the feeling that we carry most of the days of our lives. For instance, we hear these words from our Hebrews passage, when the author calls us holy brothers and sisters. Our initial reaction is often: "I'm not holy, I'm not all that good or special or set apart in some way by God. I'm not God, I'm not worthy of what God is doing in the world, and I'm certainly not worthy enough to be called holy."

One of our biggest stumbling blocks as Christians is the reality that we suffer from a masochistic spiritual life leading to an immense burden of guilt. We beat ourselves up on a daily or weekly basis thinking that we're miserable sinners, that we can't do anything right, that we're not capable of deserving God's love, that we've disappointed God in some way, or even worse, we wonder what we did wrong to deserve the things that happen in our lives. We walk around feeling guilty for the ways we've stumbled and fallen. And you know, to a degree, we're right. As human beings we are sinners, we are totally depraved – unable to save ourselves – as John Calvin would say; and yet this does not mean that we are supposed to beat ourselves up over this, it doesn't mean that we're supposed to carry the burden of so much guilt with us into our day-to-day lives.

Nowhere in Scripture does it say to beat yourself up spiritually when you screw up, or feel like you aren't cutting it, or are having a really bad year. No! The author of Hebrews reminds us who we really and truly are as "holy brothers and sisters, partners in a heavenly calling." When the going gets tough, when the bumps in the road jostle us to and fro, when the ugly guilt on our shoulder is too much to bear, we're reminded by Hebrews to "consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession." Consider Jesus, not just walk around and think happy thoughts about him, but to set our hearts and minds on Jesus alone; to contemplate our Lord and Savior on a daily basis. Consider Jesus, God-for-us in the flesh of his humanity, who isn't just some great guy to hang out with, but is the apostle and high priest of our confession, our mediator, the fix-everything guy, who stands in for us and restores to us the joy of life with God.

Now, all of that might sound like a mouthful, but it is the good news of great joy that is even better news than we often think. For this is what it means that Jesus is our mediator, the apostle and high priest of our confession: that nothing of who we are is foreign from God because Jesus the Apostle has penetrated into the depths of our humanity to become what we are; that nothing of who we are is forsaken by God because Jesus has made it his own and as our high priest stands in for us presenting us holy and blameless; that everything in our life is taken into God in, through, and as Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit to be transformed so that in Jesus, by virtue of his mission and ministry, his cross and resurrection, we are really and truly new people here and now, even while we wait for the fullness of time. In his mission from the Father to the world in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus became what we are, that in him we might be what he is. As our living, reigning, active, and present Lord he continues in this ministry, to do for us what we cannot

do on our own apart from him. He takes our feeble prayers and joins them to his own, he takes our tepid discipleship and enlivens it by joining it to his own, he takes our faith, couched within our limits and doubts, and joins it to his faith so that in all things we might find ourselves so completely clothed and immersed in his life. This isn't some pie-in-the-sky fantasy; this is the world-shaking, kingdom-of-God-anticipating, life-altering ministry of Jesus in our midst even now through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In my previous ministry experience, I'll never forget my first pastoral call. I went to the ER at Suburban. I didn't know too much about the woman I was visiting, why she was at the hospital nor what was chronically wrong with her. I knocked on the door, said her name, sat down in the chair next to her bed and tried to talk to her. After a few moments, I realized she had no idea who I was or what I was even saying. Her mind was completely gone. And so, after a few more minutes I finally said, "would you like me to pray for you," to which she abruptly replied, "No cats, only dogs growing up." In that moment I prayed for her, secure in the knowledge that Jesus was in the room, Jesus was there out of the freedom of his love in the power of the Spirit praying for and wrapping his arms around this woman in the midst of her dementia; offering her to the Father because she could not possibly lift her voice on her own or under her own power. I also remember a man I encountered in my previous call who was in a different position yet similar at the same time.

He was a seemingly normal guy, had his wits about him, came from a fairly normal background it seems, had a decent job, a nice family, but beneath the veneer this man was desperately at his wits end. Within the internal recesses of his mind he was wracked by feelings of guilt, of shame; staring into the abyss he was tempted by feelings that called him to question whether any of the junk in this life was really worth it. He was so down he

didn't have the power or strength to lift his voice to God, he didn't have the power to pray, he didn't have the power to get himself out of the rut of pain, guilt, and depression he was feeling. He didn't have the power to accept Christ's power. I remember meeting with him and telling him that no matter how guilty or down he was feeling, Jesus was there with him out of the freedom of his love in the power of the Holy Spirit. In the depths of his pain, Jesus himself, as apostle, had taken that pain of sin and death and depression and guilt onto himself, had made that man's pain his own – so joining that man to his risen and saving life so that he might heal the man by his holy love – Jesus there in the midst of that man's pain, as high priest, clothing that man with his power and righteousness so that the man might know that he was truly loved, truly forgiven, and truly joined to the life of the Lord God Almighty by virtue of his union with Jesus despite his emotional turmoil.

Friends, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession. Set your minds upon him, knowing that, even now, he lives ever to stand in for you, binding you to his risen and saving life. Jesus is continuously present in our lives; interceding for us, praying for us, leading us in worship even when we can't muster up the willingness to do it. That's what he does; as God-for-us, it's the joy of his ministry to vicariously stand in for us – presenting each and every one of our lives as holy and blameless before the throne of grace regardless of how we see our selves. And where you might ask, can we be confident of this reality, of this good news of great joy in our day-to-day, ordinary lives? We are reminded of this reality each and every time we gather together at the table of the Lord.

In the midst of worship, we hear the glorious good news of God's salvation, and as we participate in the glorious sacrament of communion, given by our Lord himself, we are continually sealed in our union with Christ, joined to his life as he presents us in himself

before the throne of grace as holy and blameless. In the glorious words of John Calvin, the community of faith “seated” at the table of the Lord “can gather great assurance and delight from this Sacrament; in it they have a witness of our growth into one body with Christ such that whatever is his may be called ours. As a consequence, we dare to assure ourselves that eternal life, of which he is the heir, is ours; and that the Kingdom of Heaven, into which he has already entered, can no more be cut off from us than from him; again, that we cannot be condemned for our sins, from whose guilt he has absolved us, since he willed to take them upon himself as if they were his own. This is the *wonderful exchange* which, out of his measureless benevolence, he has made with us; that, becoming Son of man with us, he has made us sons of God with him; that, by his descent to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, he has conferred his immortality upon us; that accepting our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; that, receiving our poverty unto himself, he has transferred his wealth to us that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon himself (which oppressed us), he has clothed us in his righteousness.”² Praise glory and honor be to Jesus Christ our Lord, the apostle and high priest of our confession; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.17.2